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ABSTRACT

While the native speaker of English already has a working command of the sound system and the structure of the English language when he enters school, the native speaker of American Spanish enters school with a quite different sound system and structural system. A good educational program for these students should have as its goal to eventually make them bilingual. Upon entering school, the child should be taught through the medium of his own language and should have a special intensive English (as a second language) course as well as a special course in Spanish for native speakers of Spanish. When the student's command of English reaches the point where he can study other courses in English, the shift can begin, usually with math and science, but the sequence of courses in Spanish for native speakers should continue throughout the school years. And in a truly bilingual setting, the English-speaking child should study oral Spanish and later study math or science using Spanish as the medium of instruction. Teachers should be knowledgeable in each language and should be familiar with the contrasts in sound and structure between Spanish and English. (HOD)

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Spanish-Speaking Children in American Schools: The Story of an Educational Crime

Donald D. Walsh

When he enters kindergarten or the first grade, the native speaker of English already has a working command of the sound system and the structure of the English language. He may not have much book learning. He may not even know how to read a book, or what a book is. But he is ready to begin learning to read. He knows the language. He can speak it and he can understand most of what he hears.

A child's first contact with language is through listening. He soon tries to imitate what he hears. He experiments with sounds, repeating those that provoke some positive and pleasurable response, rejecting the non-productive sounds. He gradually limits the sounds that he produces to those that form the syllables and words and phrases of his own language. And year after year he spends most of his waking hours achieving this audiolingual mastery.

Now consider the folly of assuming that the mere act of entering a first-grade classroom in an American school automatically confers upon a child native-born control of English. The non-native-speaker has spent his formative years learning a quite different sound system and a quite different structural system. The native speaker of American Spanish, for example, simply can not hear the difference between the vowels in 'chip' and 'cheap,' or in 'ship' and 'sheep.' He also confuses the two consonant sounds of 'ch' and 'sh,' because Spanish has no 'sh.' He can not pronounce an interdental 'th,' and the voiceless 'th' in 'think' comes out, on his lips, as either 'teenk' or 'feenk.' The voiced 'th' in 'this' comes out 'dees.' In a teaching film produced some years ago by the Center for Applied Linguistics as a guide

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for the teaching of English as a second language, a Puerto Rican grade-school teacher is drilling her pupils on long and short 'i,' 'pick' and 'peak,' 'lip' and 'leap,' 'bit' and 'beat.' The pupils in the first row manage very well, so teacher moves on. She says: "Now all dee pupils in deese row, plees."

The Spanish-speaking student is also baffled by our rather complex rules for forming negatives and interrogatives. He produces such sentences as "I no speak very good the English" and "Speak you Spanish?" He doesn't get the difference between acceptable "You're going home?" and unacceptable "When you're going home?"

Those of you who have had to cope with these added obstacles to grade-school learning are painfully aware of their importance. We are here to discuss solutions to the problem that they pose. And it is a sizable problem. Nearly a quarter of the total public-school population of New York City is Spanish-speaking. Half the school population of Tampa, Florida, is Cuban. Mexican-American children fill the schools of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California.* The problem is not only sizable; it is historic. Puerto Rico has been a dominion of the United States for seventy-five years, and for seventy-five years few Puerto Rican children in mainland schools have been offered an education that pays any real attention to their special needs.

Now I have heard people--even friends of mine--argue that it is wrong to pay special attention to these needs. All Americans, except the Indians, are the descendants of immigrants, voluntary or involuntary. Many Americans are descendants of immigrants who arrived with little or no English. Yet their children managed to learn the language. The children of Germans learned English. The children of Italians learned it. The little Poles learned it. The young Chinese learned it. Why can't Spanish-speaking children learn

*The Census Bureau in 1971 reported that nine million two hundred thousand legal residents in this country (not counting wetbacks) had Spanish as their mother tongue.

English like the children of all the other immigrants?

Some children, of course, can learn, despite all the obstacles in their paths; poor upbringing, poor schools, poor methods, poor teachers. Some children can and do educate themselves. The strength of their eagerness to know will overcome all opposition. But their task will surely be easier if opposition is replaced by sympathy and understanding. Other children don't overcome the opposition. They drop out of school. They are today's scrubwomen, bed-pan emptiers, bus boys, dishwashers, garbagemen.

The 'melting-pot' reaction to the foreignness of foreigners was selfish, short-sighted, evil. Immigrants were urged to shuck off their strangeness, put away their outlandish clothes, customs, cuisines, and languages, learn to be ashamed of their parents and especially their grandparents, and make themselves into hundred per cent Americans.

Treating non-English-speaking students as though they were native speakers does cause many of them to drop out of school. Those who stick it out usually wind up in vocational or general programs, rarely in the academic ones. In New York City, out of a hundred Puerto Rican high-school graduates, only one goes to college.

The use of the word 'bilingual' to refer to these students is a cruel irony. They are not bilingual at all. They are monolingual, and monolingual in the wrong language for the educational demands of most American schools. A good educational program should have as its goal to make them eventually bilingual. Indeed, this should be the goal for every child, including the native speakers of English.

What must we do for the Spanish-speaking child who enters school at the first or any other grade level with little or no English? We must educate him through the medium of his own language, make him literate in Spanish, teach him math, history, geography, science, all in Spanish. He will have a special course, intensive English as a second language. He will have another special course, Spanish for native speakers of Spanish.

When the student's command of English reaches the point where he can study other courses in English, the shift begins, usually with math and science, because their vocabularies are limited and neat. The sequence of courses in Spanish for native speakers continues throughout the school years.

The English-speaking child will have all his common learnings in English at first. He will begin to study oral Spanish (or some other foreign language) as soon as he goes to school. He will learn to speak and understand the spoken foreign language before he attempts to read it. As his command of Spanish grows he begins to study math or science or both, using Spanish as the medium of instruction. He will continue to have, as two of his courses, English for native speakers of English and intensive Spanish as a second language.

It may be objected that putting the Spanish-speaking students into a special program is a form of segregation. 'Segregation' is a word with dirty overtones but it means no more than 'separation,' and we have all kinds of educational separation, for good as well as for evil reasons. Every grade is a separation, every course, every class, every sport, every extra-curricular activity. And let us remember that when this special separation by language has served its purpose it will end. Our goal is to produce bilingual students

who can do most of their learning through the medium of English but who (we hope) will never cease to learn about and be proud of their native language and their native culture and their ancestors.

It may also be objected that having special tracks for Spanish-speaking students complicates the scheduling and adds to the total expense of education. The complications are undeniable but conquerable. Schedule committees should be bright enough to cope with this demand as ably as they cope with more trivial ones. Let us remember that the least complicated schedule was that of the single room in the little red schoolhouse. And as to expense, it doesn't cost any more to teach reading and writing and arithmetic in one language than in another.

Is all that I have been saying just a dream or has it really been tried out? It has indeed been tried out and it has been a clear success. The most dramatic example is in Dade County, Florida, in and around Miami. After Castro came into power there was a sudden and overwhelming influx of Cuban refugees. School officials there, trying to cope, naturally turned for help to school systems in areas that had had this problem for decades and generations. But they discovered that New York and the southwest and California had not been coping. They had done nothing effective to meet the urgent need. So Dade County began from scratch to create its own materials, curricula, standards of qualification for teachers. Dade County became the model for these special programs. It became a center to which other school systems could look for guidance. The Dade County program was described in the Reports of the Working Committees of the 1968 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. The Southwest Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages recently changed its name to the Southwest Conference on Bilingual Education

in recognition of its increasing concern with the educational needs of the Chicanos. New York City now, at last, has a bilingual school. Its principal, Herman LaFontaine, has recently been appointed director of bilingual education for all the city schools. Mr. LaFontaine was the Chairman of a Working Committee of the 1973 Northeast Conference. The report of this Committee, "Teaching Spanish to the Native Spanish Speaker," is published with the other 1973 Reports of the Working Committees. The Northeast Conference Reports are available through the MLA Materials Center, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York 10011. The American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese in 1970 appointed a committee to study this same problem. The report of the committee, "Teaching Spanish in School and College to Native Speakers of Spanish," is available in a bilingual edition as U.S. Office of Education Publication OE 72-135.

Who should be the teachers in these special programs? The teaching of Spanish and other school subjects through the medium of Spanish ought to be done by native speakers of Spanish who have studied these subjects in Spanish. It can not normally be done successfully by Americans, not even by Americans with a good command of Spanish, unless they have somehow acquired the fluency of native speakers and unless they have learned (or learned to teach) math or history or science in Spanish. For similar reasons, the teaching in English of elementary English and other subjects to native speakers of Spanish is not a task for the American teacher of Spanish. It should be done by regularly certified American teachers of English and other subjects. These teachers should have, in addition, a good knowledge of the contrasts in sound and structure between Spanish and English. Obviously, as the English-language skills of the Spanish-speaking learner approach those of the native speaker

of English, there is less and less need for his teacher to know Spanish. But any teacher of any subject should be conscious of the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of his students.

What should the English teacher do if he has just one or two Spanish-speaking students in his class and there are not enough such students in the school to justify a special program for them? He should make a sincere effort to understand their difficulties with English and to learn the points of contrast between the two languages. Two books that will greatly help the teacher are part of the Contrastive Structure Series published by the University of Chicago Press. They were both written by Robert Stockwell and J. Donald Bowen. Their titles are The Sounds of English and Spanish and The Grammatical Structures of English and Spanish. Beyond reading these books, the English teacher might profitably study some Spanish. A knowledge of the beautifully clear sound system of Spanish would make him sympathetic to the native speaker of Spanish faced with the maddening lack of logic in our own sound system.

Life and teaching school would be simpler if non-English-speaking students would just go away. But they can't go away. They are here, in our classes, and we have a moral obligation to give them an education that meets them where they are and takes them to where they ought to be.